Interiors
Design/Architecture/Culture

ISSN: 2041-9112 (Print) 2041-9120 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfin20

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To cite this article: Fátima Pombo & Hilde Heynen (2014) Jules Wabbes and the Modern Design of American Embassies, Interiors, 5:3, 315-339

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/204191114X14126916211229

Jules Wabbes and the Modern Design of American Embassies

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ABSTRACT *The American postwar policy for the construction of embassies was shaped in accordance to a modernist design conception that fostered an image of the USA as a future-oriented country. The Foreign Buildings Office (FBO) of the State Department in Washington was responsible for the approval of plans both for new buildings and for interior design. Whereas the architects for the new buildings were based in America, this was not always the case for the interior designers. For instance, the Belgian Jules Wabbes (1919–74), interior designer, furniture creator, and businessman based in Brussels, was called upon to collaborate in the design of new interior spaces for several American diplomatic institutions, including the embassies in The Hague (The Netherlands), Rabat (Morocco), and London (UK). This article will, on the basis of new archival research, substantiate Wabbes's role and his relation with the FBO, focusing especially on the embassy in The Hague as a*

Interiors
Volume 5, Issue 3
pp 315–340

 DOI: 10.2752/204191114X14126916211229

case study. The furniture that Wabbes provided was mostly based upon designs of Edward J. Wormley for Dunbar. We will argue that these designs, as well as Wabbes's further input as an interior designer, matched in many ways the architectural qualities of Marcel Breuer's design for the building, while at the same time responding to concerns of diplomatic staff about comfort and respectability. Wabbes and Wormley can thus both be considered to work in the line of what Kristina Wilson has labeled "livable modernism," a style of interior decoration that upholds many modernist values (sobriety, simplicity, truth to materials) but combines them with traditional references (e.g. through the use of wood as a dominant material) and with meticulous craftsmanship.

KEYWORDS: modern design, FBO embassies' program, The Hague Embassy, interior furbishing, Wabbes's furniture

Introduction

After the Second World War, the USA finally started to realize an ambitious program for the construction of American embassies abroad, using in many cases funds that were acquired as foreign credits in the framework of war asset agreements or similar arrangements. The FBO (Foreign Buildings Office) of the State Department in Washington, which was responsible for this program, consciously opted for modernism as the preferred architectural language for these commissions. Jane Loeffler has extensively documented how this choice was on the one hand consistent with the growing identification of modernism as the architecture heralding freedom, openness, and democracy, while, on the other hand, it had to be defended against critical voices that deemed it not solid and respectable enough to represent American values (Loeffler 1988). This tension between modern and conservative values, between transparency and solidity, between future-oriented and traditional outlooks, was only partially resolved within the buildings themselves. For the interior design, however, one can witness an evolution within the program in which the radical modernism of the early 1950s gave way to a somewhat more moderate version.

In terms of architecture, the whole program clearly embodied much stronger modernity, transparency, and orientation towards the future rather than conservative values or a traditional outlook. The FBO commissioned unquestionably modernist architects such as Harrison & Abramaovits (for the embassy in Rio de Janeiro, 1948–52 and in Havana, 1950–2), Gordon Bunshaft of SOM (for the Consulate in Düsseldorf, 1952–3), Harry Weese (for the embassy in Accra, 1956–9), or Walter Gropius (for the embassy in Athens, 1956–9). Many of these architects suggested that the interior design

for their buildings should be in line with their own aesthetic choices and recommended therefore to commission the furnishings with Knoll Associates (Loeffler 1988: 66). Hans and Florence Knoll had established a well-reputed firm which produced furniture designed by, among others, Mies Van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, and Charles and Ray Eames. The pieces they provided, such as Mies's famous Barcelona chair, were radically modern: they used innovative materials such as steel and glass, relying upon simple but abstract geometries and giving an impression of lightness and elegance rather than robustness. Rooms furnished with Knoll chairs, desks, and tables were therefore perceived by some as unusual and uncomfortable, and were deemed to lack the "dignity" required for representatives of the USA.[1] In subsequent building projects, therefore, other choices were made. It seemed that the Dunbar furniture of designer Edgar J. Wormley, while still being clearly modern and simple, might evoke less hostile reactions, because it also represented a certain continuity with older American traditions. Dunbar, however, did not produce its own furniture for the European market. It was the Belgian Jules Wabbes who represented them in Europe and who was licensed to produce their designs.

This article will substantiate Wabbes's role and his relation with FBO, focusing especially on the embassy in The Hague as a case study. We rely upon new archival research (sketches, plans, professional letters, contracts, payment notes, furniture inventories) and upon an interview with the designer's widow.[2] On the basis of this analysis, we will position his work within the cultural force field surrounding modernist design in the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that his absolute commitment towards quality of material and craftsmanship, combined with his sensible and comfortable designs, made him the ideal designer to help resolve the tensions outlined above.

Jules Wabbes and the FBO Embassies Program

The Belgian Jules Wabbes (1919–74), interior designer, furniture creator, and businessman based in Brussels, was called upon to collaborate in the design of new interior spaces for several American diplomatic institutions from 1959 to 1961, among them the embassies in The Hague (The Netherlands), Rabat (Morocco), Dakar (Senegal), Brussels (Belgium), London (UK), Port-au-Prince (Haiti), the consulate general and the American cultural center in Brussels, and the consulate general in Tangier (Morocco). Wabbes was well liked and recognized by his contemporaries for its originality, authenticity, and technical mastery. L.-L. Sosset writes in 1958 that "he concedes nothing to pastiche, to easy solution or cheap formulas … His work has a marked presence because of its noblesse and its discretion, the refinement of its texture, the perfection of its joints, the sobriety of its details" (Sosset 1958: 6). The architect André Jacqmain, with whom Wabbes collaborated from to 1951 to 1961, underlines that "extreme material perfection was Wabbes's exigency,

an absolute requirement."[3] Quality indeed was paramount for him, as can be gathered from his 1952 statement: "What matters in a piece of furniture is the sincere expression of quality" (Decharneux 1962: n.p). Wabbes's oeuvre has not yet been extensively studied, although there is a growing body of recent scholarship (Ferran-Wabbes 2010; Ferran-Wabbes and Strauwen 2012).

Wabbes's career took a head start in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, in the postwar reconstruction years. In Belgium, economic recovery happened rather fast, since the infrastructural damage was limited, compared to its neighbors (Kurgan-Van Hentenryk 1993). Thanks to the Marshall plan, America's role as a model country was more and more acknowledged. Technological development, industrial production, social-orientated welfare, and participation in international events like the Milan Trienniales and other trade fairs (Munich, Toronto, New York, Brussels) were increasingly conditioning everyday modernity. This context had a real impact on architecture and interior design. In this forward-looking context, Jules Wabbes emerged as a designer of his own furniture in 1950, the year he founded his Office of Architectural Studies and Industrial Design. Self-educated and self-made, he built up his expertise during his travels to the USA, where he discovered the works of Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Gordon Bunshaft, Philip Johnson in architecture, and Edward J. Wormley in furniture design. Wabbes kept up with contemporary creative streams and tendencies regarding brand new products and technologies, while at the same time honoring traditional craftsmanship and materials. He admired the material properties dedicating meticulous attention to the perfection of each detail while designing a piece of furniture or an interior setting.

Without formal training in architecture or design, Jules Wabbes opened an antique shop in the Chaussée de Charleroi in Brussels, in 1943, together with the actress and musician Louise Carrey. Wabbes began to work on interior decoration at the request of clients who wanted advice on where to place pieces of furniture or the object they had just bought (Ferran-Wabbes 2010: 24). In 1948, together with Edouard Mahillon, a stage designer, Wabbes would run a furniture restoration workshop in the Rue du Métal in Brussels. In 1950 he initiated the Office of Architectural Studies and Industrial Design in his house at 34 Rue de la Pépinière in Brussels. The Office was launched with major orders from clients and acquaintances gathered by Wabbes and Louise Carrey when they were working as decorators. The Office dealt with contemporary problems of design and decoration, such as the logical way to construct and outfit office blocks. As furniture maker, he started in 1950 with a desk named after the famous French actor and client Gérard Philipe and along the years he created other desks, tables, bookcases, cupboards, sofas, chairs, lamps, bathroom fittings, and some specific pieces like an ashtray or a post basket.

In 1957 Wabbes founded his own manufacturing company, Mobilier Universel, and from that moment onwards this company centralized his furniture production as well as furniture by other designers. Wabbes was, then, representing and selling furniture from Dunbar (American), Velca (Italian), Kaufeld (German), and Merivaara (Finnish). Surfing on the waves of postwar economic development Wabbes participated in international events like the 11th Milan Triennale (1957, he was awarded a silver medal for his furniture), the Toronto Fair (1957, where he designed with André Jacqmain the Belgian section), the Brussels World Fair (Expo 58), and the 12th Milan Triennale (1960, he won a gold medal and a silver medal for his school furniture). The Belgian economic growth and industrialization in the 1950s benefited him professionally by an increasing number of commissions for the public and administrative sector. Wabbes was commissioned with many interior designs and with the furbishing of a lot of offices for important financial societies, for ministries in Brussels, for enterprises, as well as private bourgeois homes. Mme Wabbes remembers that "The trips abroad brought him in contact with artists, designer critics, architects that enlarged his networking and confronted him with brand new products, materials and solutions to technical problems."[4]

His contact with the USA dates from 1954 when he was asked to design the flight decks of the Convair and Douglas aircrafts for the Belgian airline Sabena, a job for which he traveled to Santa Monica to the Douglas factories and to San Diego to the Convair factories. In 1958, from April to June, he was in New York, together with André Jacqmain, with whom he was responsible for the Belgian section at the New York World Trade Fair. These sojourns in the USA opened his horizon as a designer by confronting him with a reality very different from that at home. Marie Ferran-Wabbes stresses the importance of these American trips:

> During the trips he made from 1954 onwards, Wabbes discovered the United States. He was impressed by the scale of the country. He discovered skyscrapers and the contemporary architecture of the big cities. He found the encounter with modern American architecture dazzling. (Ferran-Wabbes 2010: 32)

It was also during these trips that he made the acquaintance of Edward J. Wormley and the Dunbar Company. It was this connection that proved to be a decisive factor when he was commissioned with the interior design for American embassies.

As Jane C. Loeffler argues, the postwar American policy of renewing, refurbishing, or building new embassies "was and remains, part of America's larger effort to define its world role" (Loeffler 1988: 3). The embassies program was shaped in accordance with a modern design conception that fostered an image of the USA as a

future-oriented country. The Modern Movement in architecture, which advocated transparency, sobriety, and the use of new materials, gradually came to embody – at least in some circles – American values such as freedom and democracy (see also Wharton 2001). In line with these ideas, the US program for renewing or building their embassies aimed at establishing a modern image of the country abroad. According to Loeffler:

> the buildings themselves served as cultural advertisements, propaganda perhaps, but nothing less than reflection of architectural theory married to political necessity. Not surprisingly, the symbols themselves were ambiguous – at once elegant and refined, decorative and flamboyant. Though often concealed behind wood, metal, or masonry screens, the buildings called attention to themselves with the openness of their glass walls, their overall accessibility and their conspicuous newness. (Loeffler 1988: 8)

The Foreign Buildings Office (FBO) of the State Department in Washington was responsible for the approval of plans both for new buildings and for interior design. Anita J. Moller Laird was the team's director responsible for the interior design of new embassies from 1947 to 1972. Whereas the architects for the new buildings were usually based in America, this was not always true for the interior designers. Here it was considered important to involve as much as possible local manufacturers and local consultants. This was, moreover, also stimulated by the fact that the credits for these projects were not coming directly from US federal money, but rather from non-tax funds such as foreign credits generated by war assets agreements. This type of funding made the control by the American Congress less severe, but was on the other hand dependent upon the possibility to find local firms to execute the designs (Loeffler 1988: 4).

Case Study: The American Embassy in The Hague

Marcel Breuer's Building

When Marcel Breuer emigrated to the USA in 1937, invited by Walter Gropius to teach at the GSD of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he had already a rich experience in Europe as a professor, architect, and furniture designer. From 1940 to 1950 Breuer designed more than seventy family houses, including his own in 1947 in New Canaan, Connecticut. Next to his projects in the USA (among them an experimental house in MoMA in 1947, the Abbey and University of St John in Collegeville in Minnesota from 1953 to 1961, the Cloister of the Sisters of St Benedictus Bismarck in North Dakota from 1954 to 1963, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York from 1963 to 1966), Breuer accepted projects in

Europe, such as the UNESCO building in Paris together with L. Nervi and B. Zehrfuss (1953–8) or the building for IBM in Nice (1963). In the Netherlands, Breuer had already designed the Bijenkorf (literally, *the beehive* – a Dutch chain of high-end department stores) in Rotterdam in 1957 – a building currently still in use – and the offices of the company Van Leer in Amstelveen.

The embassy in The Hague was the first that America opened in the Netherlands.[5] Till then, the USA had only a representation in the Netherlands which was sufficient to satisfy the relative superficial political relations between the two countries. Given the enhanced focus on relations with Europe, the embassy in the Netherlands was one of those newly built in the immediate postwar period. Marcel Breuer designed a building comprising of two wings, aligning the Lange and Korte Voorhout in The Hague, and interconnected by a transparent volume. An auditorium and parking facility were positioned in the courtyard at the inner side of the "L" formed by the two wings.

Figure 1 depicts the embassy's facade situated in the Korte Voorhout. The facades are covered with light gray natural stone from Muschel (a location in the Netherlands) with the windows in a trapezoid shape. The Dutch architect Rainer Bullhorst states:

Figure 1
Facade in the Korte Voorhout in 1963. © Haags Gemeentearchief (The Hague Town Hall Archive) (collection The Hague City Archives, 1963).

through specific elements like the fine texture of the used material, the embassy expresses an introvert character. In addition the treatment of materials gives consistency to Breuer's oeuvre … It is his most introvert, most poetic building and the most quiet in terms of conception. Considering that it is not so big as other of his projects, he could better follow his conceptual starting point like the trapezoid shape, that is the *leitmotiv* through the building and could pay more attention to details.[6]

Figure 2 depicts the plan of the ground floor of the embassy. The rooms highlighted are: 1. main entrance; 2. main lobby; 3. offices; 4. driveway to garage; 5. garden; 6. auditorium; 7. library; 8. USIS entrance.

The building indeed is modernist in its clear volumes, its functional layout, and its sober conception. The transparency that is so much part of the modernist formal language defines its most revealing moments: the entrances and the interconnecting glass walls. There are, nevertheless, also several elements that modify the possibly too-severe rationality of its modernism. Breuer dislocates

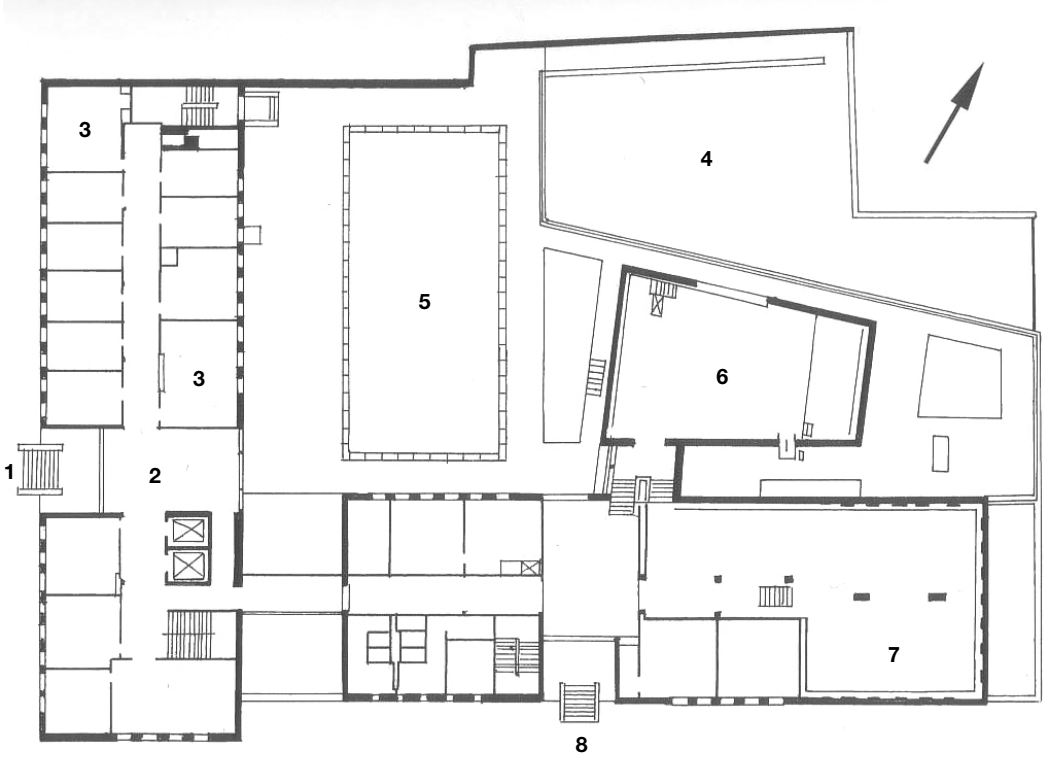

Figure 2
Ground-floor plan after drawing in Galema and Hooimeijer (2008). © Galema and Hooimeijer.

the stark simplicity of the spaces by adding, through the insertion of the separate auditorium pavilion, some oblique lines that enhance the spatial experience of the whole. The building's facades display a regularity and a rhythm that are unequivocally modernist, but the trapezoid shape of the windows and the stone cladding give it a gravity that is not always part of the vocabulary of modernism. The very careful choice of materials – especially the wood for balustrades, doorknobs, and paneling, as well as the black schist of the floor in the entrance halls – add a quality of refinement that is also not standard in modernism.

The interior of the building is mostly determined by its role as an office building. Nevertheless, there are some interior spaces that have been deemed especially interesting. In particular, the entrance halls and the library are commonly acknowledged as fine spaces. The Dutch monument service, for example, recognizes "the attention that Breuer put in the finishing of the central space such as the entrance halls [Figures 3 and 4] and the stairs."[7] They also point to the library, which is a double-height volume with the outspoken presence of two trapezoid columns (Figure 5). The trapezoid motif is thus repeated again and again throughout the building, giving it a distinct identity.

Interior Furbishing

The FBO commission The interior furbishing of The Hague embassy was the responsibility of Anita Moller Laird, who headed the FBO's interior design group from 1949 to 1972 (Loeffler 1988: 91). She decided on models from the collection of Dunbar Furniture Corporation, located in Berne, Indiana, and designed by the American Edward J. Wormley (1907–95). Wormley was a prolific designer whose work

Figure 3
Embassy entrance hall. Wormley/Dunbar furniture. © Jan Versnel/MAI.

Figure 4
USIS entrance hall [United States Information Service] with view to the interior garden and stairs leading to the auditorium. Wormley/Dunbar furniture. © Jan Versnel/MAI.

Figure 5
Library depicting the two columns. Wormley/Dunbar furniture. © unknown.

has been labelled "eclectic" (O.G. 1956: 96), but fitted in fact very well within modernist interiors, because of its simplicity, clear lines, and overall elegance. The manufacturing of the furniture was commissioned to Jules Wabbes, who was the representative of Dunbar for Europe. In the summer of 1958, Wabbes's company, Mobilier Universel, had signed a contract of production in exclusivity for Europe of the furniture from Dunbar. A letter dated June 27, 1958, sent from the Executive Office of Dunbar to Jules Wabbes, stated that "enclosed is the Agreement by which we will be happy to work with you and allow you to use our name and our designs in Europe. We hope that this Agreement meets with your approval as it is a written understanding of what you can expect from us and what we can expect from you in working together."8 The letter finishes with details about costs relating to crating furniture to ship overseas. In a letter dated August 1, 1958, the Vice President of Dunbar, Gilbert L. Thurston writes to Wabbes that:

> now that we have come to an agreement that you shall make and sell Dunbar furniture in Europe exclusively we would like to add your name to a list of our showroom in our future advertising. We also urge you to make your selection of designs that you will carry in your showroom as quickly as possible.[9]

In another letter dated the same day, Gilbert L. Thurston, informs Mrs Moller from the FBO that:

> after investigation we are satisfied this firm [Mobilier Universel] can manufacture fine furniture along the American style and craftsmanship. They are licensed to manufacture and sell furniture in any country in Europe. As soon as this firm has established their own prices on Dunbar furniture we will see that you get the price list so that you can specify Dunbar furniture for your work in the American Embassies in Europe.[10]

Working with Wabbes thus allowed the FBO to opt for "American-designed furniture," while still having it manufactured and paid for in Europe. In view of the urgent deadlines and the preference for paying with foreign funds, they clearly opted to work with a reliable local firm, while still featuring "American" design.

Gilbert L. Thurston assures that Jules Wabbes and his firm Mobilier Universel are the best choice because he "can manufacture fine furniture along the American style and craftsmanship," as stated in the letter quoted above. We know that Wabbes flew to Washington to personally negotiate the commission. As documented also by Wijnand and Hooimeijer, he made a very good impression on the FBO people and therefore got a say in the choice of fabrics for the furniture (Wijnand and Hooimeijer 2008: 58). He was also able to include in the project some of his own office furniture, like board-room tables and bookcases, and moreover designed a post basket in laminated and molded African black walnut especially for the embassy.

In the letters exchanged between Jules Wabbes, Anita Moller and Gilbert L. Thurston, currently accessible in the Wabbes's archive, there is no mention of Breuer having a say in the furbishing of the embassy. The only reference to Marcel Breuer appears in a letter from Wabbes to Mr Thurston on April 21, 1959: "… The U.S. Embassy in the Hague has arranged a meeting for me with Mr. Breuer, whom I propose to bring down to Brussels on visit."[11] There is, however, no further record as to whether or not this meeting took place.

As Wijnand and Hooimeijer have already suggested, the selection of Wabbes for this commission is consistent with the choice of the FBO for a "comfortable modernism" (Galema and Hooimeijer 2008: 59). Modernism, at its most radical, evoked rather visceral counter-reactions among American audiences. Modernism in the visual arts was at a certain point even completely rejected as a good choice for representing American values and American ideals in the country's embassies abroad (Loeffler 1988: 5–6). That modernist architecture remained the preferred idiom for these buildings was thus not automatically a given, but rather the outcome of multiple forces and alliances documented by Loeffler. Within this complex constellation, the voice of the actual ambassadors and their staff

was definitely heard when it came to the choice of furniture and decoration. Dunbar's furniture – and that of Wabbes in that it followed a similar philosophy – represented a very acceptable option: it was modern, but still comfortable; it referred to American traditions of craftsmanship (e.g. in working with solid wood), while still obeying the modernist rules of simplicity and sobriety. It thus proved an excellent choice, because it matched well with the simple but refined qualities of Breuer's interior spaces, while at the same time not offending the users' expectations of quality and comfort.

Wabbes committed himself completely to the The Hague project and was proud of Mobilier Universel's production, as he writes in a letter to Gilbert L. Thurston on April 14, 1959: "I would like to repeat how pleased I am that my new plant will allow of bringing forth an excellent production of Dunbar's models."[12] The cooperation apparently was mutually satisfactory, and there were plans also for trading Wabbes's furniture in USA: "We are waiting for your description and prices of the secretarial chair and desk so we can order these from you with the hope of first protecting them here design wise and to get an estimate of what it would cost to sell these items here in America."[13]

The correspondence also shows that Gilbert L. Thurston and Jules Wabbes exchanged more than just factual information regarding the furniture's production. In a letter dated September 15, 1958, Gilbert L. Thurston besides referring to "certain models of our new office group that they [FBO] are considering for the new Embassy in The Hague," also mentions that "I have just spoken to Philip Johnson who advises me that he is interested in your designs and plans to visit you the latter part of October."[14] The visit had occurred on October 31, as we can deduct from what Wabbes writes in a letter from October 30, 1958, to Gilbert L. Thurston: "Mr. Johnson will be visiting me tomorrow and we shall be spending two or three days together, during which period I will show him the different things and places he wishes to see in Belgium."[15] In the same letter Wabbes expresses his concerns about the short time left until the inauguration of the embassy and proposes to:

> short-circuit the system and that you send me, as your Distributor, direct, the plans and descriptions of the models chosen by the State Department for the Hague Embassy Office building. This, of course, is only a suggestion to gain time. Furthermore, Miss Moller in her letter has asked for the drawings of a small table to go with the sofa and the armchair.[16]

This last sentence reveals the confidence that the FBO was rendering to Wabbes, commissioning him and not for example Wormley to design the small table to match with the sofa and the armchair. The inauguration of the embassy took place on July 4, 1959, even if the complete installation of the furniture was not achieved.

Quality of Wormley's and Wabbes's furniture Edward J. Wormley began work for Dunbar in 1931 and from then designed a diverse range of objects, like rugs, lamps, fabrics, and innumerable pieces of furniture, with immediate success. He had a reputation for being flexible and for anticipating a multitude of different exigencies that might come up in commissions for his firm (O.G. 1956: 101). From 1944 onwards the Dunbar Company decided to follow modernist aesthetics and Wormley responded by incorporating European and Scandinavian elements into his designs. Wormley's furniture was admired for being "invariably comfortable, well-proportioned, elegant, suitable … Wormley does not design furniture *per se*, as sculpture might be designed, but as a tool which must serve some given visual and functional purpose in an interior" (O.G. 1956: 96–101).[17] Many of his pieces have won awards and the inclusion of his work in the Good Design Exhibitions displayed by the Museum of Modern Art and the Merchandise Mart between 1950 and 1955 alongside with the Eameses, Saarinen, Nelson, and Bertoia brought him the ultimate recognition and prestige. However, Wormley never identified completely with modernist design. His aesthetic vocabulary also found inspiration in elements from periods before the 1930s, like Arts & Crafts, Tiffany, or Art Deco, integrating them with versatility and high standards of quality.

Wormley's exigency that the production at Dunbar achieved an exceptionally well-made quality was one of the reasons that contributed to the choice of Mobilier Universel as the furniture's supplier for the embassy at The Hague, as the correspondence exchanged between Jules Wabbes and Gilbert L. Thurston states. There are a few personal letters between the two designers in the Wabbes archive that are testimony to cordiality, mutual respect, and some familiarity. Madame Wabbes remembers: "my husband and Mr. Wormley felt mutual esteem. My husband met him in New York and visited him some times in his apartment where he was living with the mother in New York too."[18]

The importance attributed by Wabbes, Wormley, and Dunbar's board to wood as the main material to produce furniture is also a factor in their collaboration, as Galema and Hooimeijer (2008: 58) point out. Jules Wabbes considered wood "as an irreplaceable material," which gave him a "maximum of guaranties: it allows me to get in a spirit of simplicity and of beauty, a result that seems to flow from the source" (Wabbes 1963: n.p.).[19] Regarding wood slat furniture Wabbes created a delicate visual effect by using alternate end-grain wood and glued wooden slats. "He liked wood for its great variety of essences and grains, its wide range of colours, its warmth, its smell and its hardness" (Ferran-Wabbes 2010: 27). Madame Wabbes confirms his high regard for craftsmanship: "For Wabbes eyes and touch have to approve a piece of furniture. The back of a piece should be as perfect as the visible one."[20] His aim in designing

was to create a piece for posterity, thanks to its quality, simplicity, and vitality of form.

Joints were very important in this ambition, as Wabbes himself stated: "the quality of a piece of furniture can be seen from the joints" (Ferran-Wabbes 2010: 27). His constructive principles were based upon: (1) careful choice of materials, (2) meticulous attention to detail, (3) the precision of the adequate machinery, and (4) the perfection of construction. In an essay about the techniques used by Wabbes, the combination of craftsmanship procedures with modern machinery is what gives the Wabbes furniture its "signature," according to Borret (2000: 114).

This approach, combining modernist principles with traditional qualities, is common to both Wabbes and Wormley. Aesthetically the furniture of both designers was displaying an image of elegance, convenience, and comfort, combining straight lines with curved lines in a very proportioned effect. Using wood, leather, and fabrics rather than leather and steel, the overall feeling conveyed by the pieces was one of warmth rather than coolness. The quality offered by craftsmanship in combination with industrial production gave the pieces a character of careful uniqueness and perfection. Wormley's and Wabbes's design is therefore more in line with the Scandinavian version of modernism rather than with the radical avant-garde. According to Mme Wabbes, Wabbes indeed knew Alvar Aalto's work and most probably also the work of Arne Jacobsen who designed in the 1950s the Ant chair, the Egg chair, and the Swan chair.

Wabbes's embassy interiors With both the furniture of Wormley and his own, Wabbes had to accomplish the mission of setting the different embassy interiors. Whereas the standard offices have not been documented, we have contemporary pictures of the ambassador's office (Figure 7), the conference room (Figure 8), a meeting room (Figure 9), and a waiting room (Figure 11). The interiors of these rooms did not survive a series of retrofittings, so we have to assess them on the basis of these black-and-white pictures alone. The furbishing of each room depicts a concern with the function as well as with its representative connotation. Therefore, the choice of each piece of furniture, curtains, or accessories seems to have been done to display a particular atmosphere without losing the perspective of creating aesthetic harmony among the rooms and with the building's character and architectural elements.

Wabbes did more than just provide furniture. He acted as an interior designer who took care of the whole atmosphere of the interior spaces, establishing, as Etienne Paquay comments, "a precise dialogue between the space and the furniture, the lighting fixtures and the objects," and thus "creating harmony by the simple fact of setting the things in their places" (Paquay and Wabbes 1996: 56). This was also appreciated by his American client. In a letter written to Jules Wabbes on July 28, 1959, Anita Moller states that:

> all your efforts on behalf of the satisfactory completion and attractive installation of furnishings in The Hague are very much appreciated, as well as your reports on progress being made. We realize that there are many problems in installation with which it is difficult to deal, but are confident that the job is in good hands.[21]

It is probably in the light of this more encompassing interpretation of his commission that he also created a very elegant post basket in laminated and molded African black walnut, designed especially for the embassy (Figure 6).

Figure 7 shows the ambassador's room set with Wormley/Dunbar furniture and Wabbes's executive desk designed in 1958. Furniture pieces (executive desk, tables, chairs, sofa) and a lamp organize the space to offer the opportunity of different meeting niches. Lighting interplays with the ceiling lamps, the lamp in the background, and the windows (suggested in the picture by the curtains). The overall impression is of a comfortable room, furnished with pieces made from high-quality materials (wood and leather), but at the same time sober and frugal regarding decoration. Wabbes chose to hang only one picture in the walls. Breuer's architectural design had fitted this room with teak wooden paneled walls (with trapezoid lining), a fireplace, trapezoid-shaped windows (not visible in this picture), and

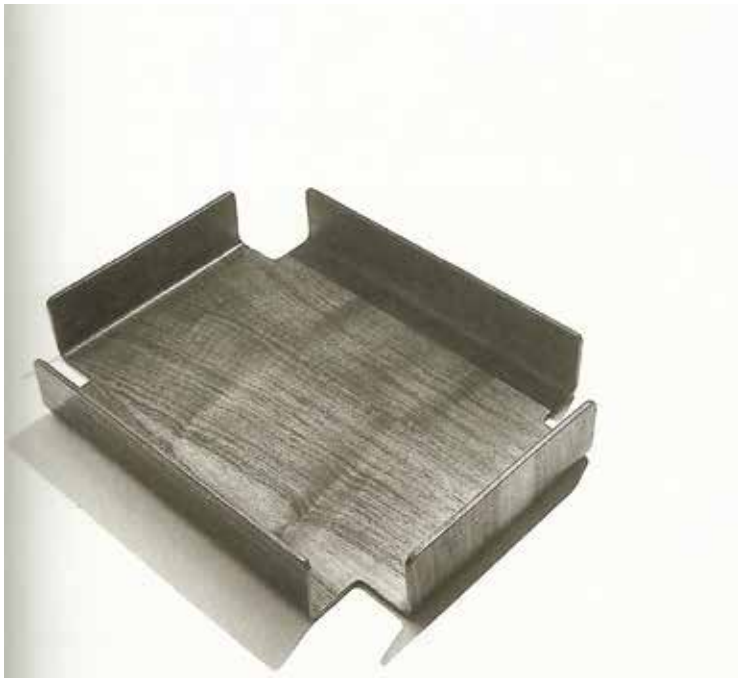

Figure 6
Post basket designed by Wabbes. © ADAGP, Paris, 2014.

Figure 7
Ambassador's office. © US Embassy, The Hague.

suspended ceilings containing the recessed fluorescent lighting and concealing the mechanical fixtures and ducts. The chosen furniture displays geometrical lines matching either the straight lines of the room or the trapezoid shape of the windows. Wood as the principal material also matched the paneled wooden walls. The furniture was not specially designed for this room. One can assume, however, that Wabbes's attention to details and his attempt to create harmony in the ensemble influenced his choice for these particular models. The curtains were also chosen by Wabbes, approved by the FBO, and made and installed by D.M. Schakel from Amsterdam. Wabbes selected a geometric, textured pattern which on the one hand reinforces the general geometric conception of the room, while on the other hand softening its stark lines by the draped fabric. The same curtain's pattern is found in the waiting room (Figure 11).

Figure 8 shows the conference room completely furbished with Wormley/Dunbar furniture. A long table placed parallel with the windows is surrounded by armchairs; a sofa, a side table, and a lamp are positioned opposite to the windows; a wooden bookcase

Figure 8
Conference room. © Jan Versnel/MAI.

completely covers the back wall. The very geometrical form of the furniture combined with the trapezoidal shape of the windows strongly influences the perception of the space. The pieces of furniture are not striking – they do not take attention away from the architectural elements defining the room. The table is not a Wabbes table (see Figure 9 and 10), the design of which would have resonated with the trapezoidal shape of the windows, but a rectangular Wormley's design, understated but functional and comfortable. The bookcase is a consistent feature of modernist interiors, appearing as a "natural" wall finish that aligns with the masculinity and authenticity expected from such interiors (Braham 1999: 4–14). The overall impression of the room is indeed that of a space with the minimal elements to welcome a working meeting. The ensemble of the room emphasizes the architectural elements, the ceiling, the windows, and the wooden paneled walls. Only the curtains somewhat interrupt the rectilinearity of the whole, picking up on the element of warmth and comfort also implied in the chairs and sofa.

Figure 9 depicts a meeting room furbished with table and bookcases, designed by Wabbes (a more detailed perspective of

Figure 9
Meeting room with showcases and table designed by Wabbes, respectively in 1958 and 1959. and Velca chairs. © Jules Wabbes Archive.

Figure 10
Boardroom in Brussels set in 1968 with armchairs 56, covered in leather with metal base and table designed by Wabbes respectively in 1960 and 1959. ©ADAGP, Paris, 2014.

Wabbes's conference table can be seen in Figure 10, which shows a boardroom setting elsewhere), and Velca chairs. The harmony of the materials of all the furniture pieces in the meeting room is notable: steel underframe for the table and for the display cabinets (not so visible in the picture but an element of Wabbes's constructive technique), steel for the chairs' legs and arms, solid exotic wood-strips for the top of the table and for the bookcases matching with the chairs' leather upholstery and seat. The curtains provide a feeling of privacy and warmth and allow the daylight in the room to be regulated. The monochromatic fabric gives a visual continuity with the walls that are painted instead of paneled with wood. Clearly, Wabbes adjusted the choice of furniture to the more pragmatic function of the room. Here, the need for a recognizably "comfortable" modernism gave way to the more outspoken roughness and functionality of the Velca chairs.

Figure 11 displays a room totally furbished with Wormley's furniture from the Dunbar catalog. The curtains are from the same pattern and model of those of the ambassador's office. The furniture pieces seen in the picture, namely a sofa, two types of side tables and chairs (with and without arms) suggest again a comfortable space with frugal decoration. The objects on the tables seem to be ashtrays. This is a space for a short stay, it is not expected that visitors would leave individual traces.

Jules Wabbes thus furbished the embassy with sober, simple, straight geometric lines furniture and curtains with geometric patterns matching the interior design with the architectonic style of Breuer's building. Relying upon an aesthetic of simplicity, Wabbes was able at the same time to create a working ambience of comfort and well-being. He combined in harmony functionality, quality, and comfort required for such spaces as the ambassador's office, the

Figure 11
Waiting room. © Jules Wabbes Archive.

conference room, and other meeting rooms. He fitted the furniture models of the Dunbar collection with models designed by him providing a pleasant work scenario. Thus, the general impression of minimalist settings was compensated for with wooden furniture, curtains, and a few decorative pieces displaying a sensation of warmth, order, and balance. Through such subtle interventions, the modernist architecture was complemented by an interior design that was far from radical but rather continued the line of "livable modernism" that Kristina Wilson identified in 1930s America (Wilson 2004). Indeed, by consistently using warm and comfortable materials, while still respecting modernist conventions of sobriety and simplicity, a balance is found between the functionality and rationality for which modernism was known and the atmosphere of well-established comfort and respectability that was preferred by many members of the diplomatic staff (and their wives), who tended to be somewhat conservative in their expectations.

Wabbes's Last FBO Commissions

The work done by Wabbes in The Hague embassy was gladly welcomed and praised by the people involved. Anita Moller wrote to the

designer on November 2, 1959,: "Mrs. Robinson [Barbara Robinson is a collaborator of the FBO] has returned with excellent reports of your good work in The Hague, which has also been mentioned to us by Mr. Harold Sprunger [Vice president of Dunbar Corporation] and by Mr. Skoufis [collaborator of The Hague embassy]."[22] And in the same letter, Mrs Moller mentions the Rabat project:

> We are now looking forward very much to receiving your proposal for the Office Building in Rabat. I am enclosing two photographs of a recent American Institute of Decorators exhibit showing preliminary lay-out plans, a model and a rendering of this project. Perhaps they will be of some help to you. Our latest information indicates that the Rabat Office Building will be ready for installation of furniture about the first of May. For this reason you can readily understand that we would like to have your estimates before the end of this month.[23]

On January 7, 1960, Jules Wabbes signed, on behalf of Mobilier Universel, an agreement [contract nº S4-FBO-168] between his company and the State Department concerning the commission of the complete interior decoration and furnishing with models in wood designed by him for the embassy in Rabat. The agreement specifies that: "The Contractor [Mobilier Universel] warrants that all items of furniture will be manufactured in accordance with the estimates, specifications and presentations submitted to the Government in Washington by Mr. Jules Wabbes in December 1959."[24] Figure 12 depicts the plan of an L-shaped desk and Figure 13 shows the L-shaped desk in an office at the Rabat embassy. By request from Rabat, Wabbes had to design a front cover for the desk – probably in order for the female clerks of the embassy to hide their legs behind this cover.

According to the terms of the agreement all exposed wood on the furniture has to be African Bete Mansonya except for a few rosewood items.

The designer traveled to Rabat to oversee the installation of the furniture, which was completely produced in Belgium, as mentioned in the agreement: "Mr. Jules Wabbes will travel from Brussels, Belgium to Rabat where he will supervise the installation on the American embassy of all items of furniture supplied under this contract."[25]

In a letter dated February 11, 1960, Wabbes assures Mr Thurston that the Rabat project has his full attention and adds information related to the expansion of the Mobilier Universel business and the appreciation of Dunbar's furniture in Europe:

> I am leaving today for Cologne where we have a stand at the Furniture fair, the most important in Europe. We are also to

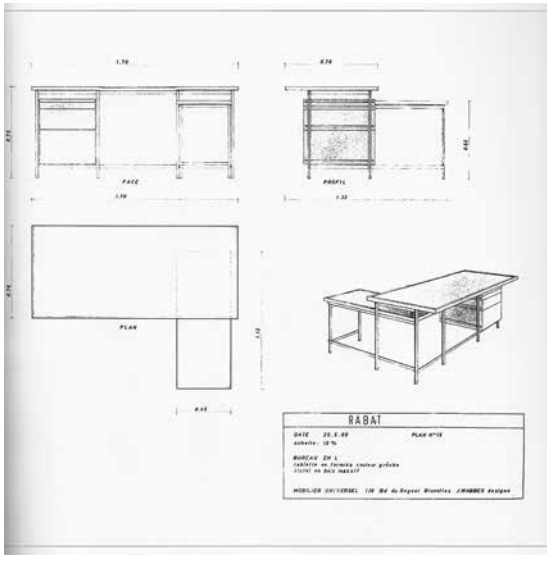

Figure 12
Plan of a L-shaped desk for the American embassy in Rabat, 1960, designed by Jules Wabbes.

Figure 13
Interior of an office in the American embassy in Rabat, 1960, set by Jules Wabbes.

> participate in another fair, in Brussels, on February 20th next, where we have a large stand. For the month of May, we are invited by the Belgian Government to a large exhibition at the Munich fair. I am happy to say that Dunbar Furniture is meeting with increasing success in Europe … In Milan, I am negotiating the opening of a new showroom, quite a big one, and will keep you posted.[26]

He thus subtly (or not so subtly) conveys the message that his business met with increasing success and recognition throughout Europe, knowing full well that the FBO is still working on other European projects. A most prestigious one was the American embassy in London. The commission for the interior design of that building was clearly a coveted one. Dunbar/Wabbes were lobbying to receive that commission, as evidenced in letters exchanged between Thurston and Wabbes in April 1959, being well aware, however, that there was "considerable pressure in the English diplomatic circles to have all furniture made in England for this particular job."[27] They manage, nevertheless, to also land this commission, no doubt helped very much by the fact that most everybody involved was quite happy with the results of the interventions in The Hague and Rabat.

Satisfaction with Wabbes's work is very likely an argument to add to the reasons why the State Department in Washington

further commissioned him to deliver furniture designed by him or by Wormley and produced by Mobilier Universel for the embassies or consulates of Dakar (Senegal), Brussels (Belgium), London (UK), Port-au-Prince (Haiti), the consulate general and the American cultural center in Brussels, and the consulate general in Tangier (Morocco) (Ferran-Wabbes 2010: 46). As far as it was possible to track with reliable evidence the processes leading to commissioning Wabbes, it was clear that the most important elements were the relationship of trust between the Belgian designer, the FBO officials, and Dunbar Furniture directors, the expected commercial benefits for all partners, and the understanding that they shared the same standards as to high professional performance and a similar vision about livable modernism for interiors.

Conclusion

In choosing well-known modernist architects for their embassies in foreign countries, the FBO of the State Department in Washington followed a well-considered policy line which intended to show the world a progressive image of America as a future-oriented country. For the interiors, apparently, they did not follow exactly the same course. The symbolic value of the diplomatic modernist buildings, intended to display a powerful yet seductive political image of the USA abroad, was not extended completely to the furbishing of interiors. For interiors, other strategies were taken into evaluation; such as the need to represent America by American design while at the same time reducing logistical costs and taking into account the taste of the diplomats using the spaces. The manufacturing of furniture, curtains, and decorative objects was therefore preferably located in the region rather than being shipped from USA. The FBO thus found in Jules Wabbes an excellent partner, because of both his good business relations with the Dunbar Company, for which he manufactured furniture in Europe, and his own capacities as a designer. If the American policy for interiors was not as radical as for the buildings, the quality of the manufacturing and the aesthetic features of the furniture were, nevertheless, key factors in their commissioning policy. These were elements to which Wabbes was able to respond, in a way that clearly greatly satisfied his clients. His position, as a designer, in a “livable” rather than “radical” modernism, worked well for him in this particular context. His capacity, as a self-educated and self-made designer, to combine modernist principles with professionalism and with a striving towards harmony, quality, and well-being in daily life, might well be the ultimate reason for his success in these prestigious jobs.

Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to Madame Wabbes and Wijnand Galema for their kind sharing of information, and to the art historian Marie Ferran-Wabbes for her kindness in granting us access to documents from her father’s archive in her possession.

Notes

1. See Loeffler (1988: 67), quoting a report to the Congress on Knoll pieces in the Brussels embassy.
2. Mme Wabbes, interview by the authors. Personal interview, Maransart, Brussels, January 16, 2014.
3. André Jacqmain quoted in Paquay and Wabbes (1996: 57).
4. Mme Wabbes interview, January 16, 2014.
5. Wijnand Galema and Fransje Hooimeijer frame in detail the story of the embassy since the approved plans by the Foreign Buildings Office (FBO) of State Department in Washington till the present (Galema and Hooimeijer 2008).
6. "Door bepaalde elementen, zoals een hele fijne textuur in de gebruikte materialen, ademt de ambassade zelfs een bepaalde ingetogenheid uit. De materiaalbehandeling is overigens iets dat het oeuvre van Breuer stijlvast en consistent maakt … Het is zijn meest ingetogen, meest poëtische gebouw en het meest rustige qua opzet. Omdat het niet zo groot is als veel van zijn andere ontwerpen, kon hij ook beter vasthouden aan conceptuele uitgangspunten zoals de reeds genoemde trapezevorm, die de rode draad is door het gebouw, en meer aandacht schenken aan details" (Rob den Boer interviews Architect Rainer Bullhorst in Hofvijver Magazine, January 2013)
7. "door de aandacht die Breuer heeft geschonken aan de afwerkingen van de centrale ruimten, zoals de entreehallen [Figures 3 and 4] en de trappenhuizen" ("Amerikaanse Ambassade" n.d.).
8. Letter from the Jules Wabbes archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Letter from Gilbert L. Thurston to Jules Wabbes dated from April 7, 1959. Archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
14. Letter from the Jules Wabbes archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. "Wormley's living room offers an opportunity to observe his method of designing an interior. It is filled with an immense variety of richly decorative objects – plants, paintings, glass, Tanagra, basketry, books, and some very fancy furniture, not to mention leather, metal-shot fabrics, Dorothy Liebes and Jack Lenor Larsen textures, embroideries, Siamese silks, Moroccan rugs. Nevertheless it is now cluttered, and if you look hard you will see that what keeps it in order is the strongly controlled architectural alignment" (O.G. 1956: 101).
18. Mme Wabbes interview, January 16, 2014.

19. For this project – the restaurant Drugstore Louise – he won the Grand Prix du Bois 1963 (The Great Wood Prize) awarded by the Brabant province of Belgium. For an approach to different techniques of the use of wood by Jules Wabbes see Hossey (1988: 54–5).
20. Mme Wabbes interview, January 16, 2014.
21. Letter from the Jules Wabbes archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Contract in the Jules Wabbes archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
25. Letter from the Jules Wabbes archive in possession of Marie Ferran-Wabbes (unpublished).
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

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